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ABSTRACT

The principles and practices of successful parent centers in urban schools are presented so that parents and staff can use them when developing a center. The successful center begins with adoption of a model or philosophy to guide parents and staff. An interactive learning model is suggested as the most workable one, and its principles are summarized as follows: (1) parents have their own place, planning and staffing their own center; (2) everyone learns from everyone else, with children the main attraction of the center; (3) the parent center is essential to the school's operation, taking over the school's business with parents; and (4) the center is accessible and hospitable. A parent center should be a place where parents feel at home and enjoy themselves even as they learn. Activities should combine business and fun. (SLD)

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BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL PARENT CENTER IN AN URBAN SCHOOL

Introduction

Many teachers and administrators, particularly in urban schools, believe that parents do not care about their children's schooling. Conversely, many parents believe that school professionals are arrogant and unhelpful. These barriers of misunderstanding and mistrust persist because parents and educators do not know each other and do not work together. The solution is to have more parents in the schools, not just as visitors but rather as participants: "The tone and content of school conversations about parents and their communities change when parents are physically present in the building. It is difficult for school employees to say, 'The parents just don't care,' when caring parents can be seen daily" (Davies, 1991).

Thus, many Federal and local programs to improve the achievement of urban and disadvantaged students mandate and fund a parent involvement component. One type of parent participation program—the operation of a parent center in the school—has been especially successful. This digest presents the principles and practices of vital and ongoing centers so that parents and staff can use them when developing their own center.

Models for Building a Center

A successful center begins with the adoption of a model, or philosophy, to guide parents and staff. In her comparison of home-school collaboration philosophies, Swap (1990) describes three models: (1) school to home transmission, (2) partnership for school success, and (3) interactive learning. The school to home transmission model is one-sided; parents receive information from the school but have little opportunity to provide information or contribute anything else. The partnership for school success model is too ambitious for many urban schools; parents are required to become full partners in governing the school, and, often, poor parents have too little time and too many hardships to concentrate on their children's schooling. This model also requires enormous time and effort from school staff.

The interactive learning model, on the other hand, does not demand too much from either the parents or the school. It does ask parents to draw upon their diverse cultures and to contribute some time and talent to enrich their children's education. It asks planners to "incorporate the views, values, history, and learning styles of minority families into the fabric of the school and curriculum," and "to support increased achievement of minority children in the school" (Swap, 1990).

Interactive Learning Model Principles for Planning a Center

The four principles governing a parent center using the interactive learning model are discussed below:

1. Parents Have Their Own Place

Parents Plan Their Center. Parents need a place in the school, and the school needs them there. A center of their own, designed by the parents themselves, with the help of the school staff, provides the best way for parents to feel truly welcome at school. In planning the center, parents and school staff should consider the following:

- what their families need from the center, and what the families can contribute to support it;
- how families feel toward the school, and how school staff feels and acts toward them;
- what resources are available in the school and community;
- what the obstacles are and how to overcome them; and
- what realistic goals should be set.

Usually, the parents' next major task is to hold their first large parents' meeting. They might meet in a parent's home, a church, or a community center if they do not yet feel comfortable in the school.

Personal Contact Is a Must. Especially at the start of a center, parents and school staff must recruit other parents by talking face-to-face with them, even by visiting their homes (D'Angelo & Adler, 1991). No other communication is nearly as persuasive—neither signs, mailed invitations, nor telephone calls.

Parents Lead and Set Priorities. School staff might start the recruitment, but parents must take the lead soon. Moreover, parents should set the priorities for center activities. At the start of one center in an elementary school, for example, parents wanted to tackle the threats of teenage pregnancy and AIDS, even though the staff was more concerned with parents' reading to their children. Center planners first addressed the parents' concerns and then the staff's, which meant that the parents controlled their own agenda. Usually, however, parents and staff agree. For example, many parents at two centers wanted to speak and read English better in order to help their children with schoolwork and to participate in school activities. So, they set up English as a Second Language classes for themselves (Heleen, 1990).

Parents Staff Their Center. A center that is a place for parents should also be staffed by parents. In some schools, parents are hired as center coordinators (Davies, 1991). Their salaries and other expenses are paid by Chapter 1 and/or other supplemental funds. They host other parents who visit, recruit volunteers, track down parents of sick children, organize center activities, and make all-important home visits. They are joined by parent volunteers who work in the center and classrooms, and escort classes on field trips.

2. Everyone Learns from Everyone Else

The Unreachable Are Reachable. For an urban school center to succeed, its organizers must enlist all parents, and enlist them as both teachers and learners. Too often, educators regard poor parents as unreachable. For many poor parents, it is schools that are unreachable. Nevertheless, many fathers, teenage mothers, and seriously troubled families are difficult, if not impossible, to recruit and retain. To have the best chance at

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recruiting and engaging members, a center should use a variety of methods and activities.

A Boston center reaches fathers, grandfathers, and uncles with Fathers' Breakfasts. With these Breakfasts, mothers acknowledge the importance of the males' care for their children (Johnson, 1990). The same center also invites fathers to work with other fathers on carpentry projects. Another center reaches teenage mothers by appealing to *their* mothers, and offering small useful gifts to teenagers who attend parenting workshops. At the insistence of their mothers, some daughters attend in order to claim the gifts. Yet another center reaches at-risk families with home visits and counseling by social agencies (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

Their Children Are the Attraction of the Center. Though the center is for parents, their children are the reason that parents are there. Therefore, the children should be present in spirit and sometimes in person. First, a center should recognize students' achievements. In one school, teachers personally invite parents to view their children's prize works exhibited at the center. In another, students and their parents attend center award dinners (Heleen, 1990). Second, a center can help students directly. Children come to one center after school for tutoring by parent volunteers, preferring the center to their empty houses or the streets. The program has gotten so popular that some teachers now stay late to tutor (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

Parents Interact with Staff. The center should be a place where parents interact with school staff: the "key to [parent] involvement may not be with the families per se but may depend on the professionals' commitment to enhance the collaborative relationship with the family" (Correa, 1989).

In one school, students, parents, and teachers set goals together and sign learning contracts. These contracts are signed and executed at a parent center, a less intimidating place than at teachers' desks. Reflecting the core idea of the interactive model, a center can hold discussions for staff to learn parents' cultures and for parents to learn the school's goals and programs. Finally, in one school, teachers and parents form teams to resolve conflicts between families and the school (Davies, 1991).

3. The Parent Center Is Essential to the School's Operation

A Center Takes over Business with Parents. To become an integral part of a school, a parent center should: (1) take over much of the school's dealings with parents, (2) create and distribute vital information, and (3) receive adequate resources to accomplish (1) and (2). By assuming most parent business, the center lessens congestion in the school office and treats parents with patience and respect.

If the center is near school offices, it can supply family information easily and give parents and the principal access to each other. It must have files and equipment, particularly a telephone (Davies, 1991). It especially needs a coordinator who relates well to parents and devotes much time to establishing the center.

A Center Distributes Good News. A successful center conveys information both ways that parents and the school need for their respective jobs. One center provides students with bags for taking home books and urges parents to read aloud to their children. As Johnson (1990) points out, the book bags are more good news that the center accentuates. Too often, urban parents hear only bad news from school. In addition to good news, they need information about their children's schoolwork and even a place to practice their tutoring skills, which are functions of a parent center (D'Angelo & Adler, 1991). Conversely, the center gathers information about families that helps the educators.

4. The Center Is Accessible and Hospitable

Accessibility. The center should be open when parents can come to it. In one school, staff and volunteers are there before and after school, as well as during the day, to greet parents. Its activities are scheduled when parents can attend, in the evenings after mealtime. Also, parents more likely to attend center activities when daycare and recreation for older children are provided (Nicolau & Ramos).

Hospitality. The center should be a place where parents feel at home and enjoy themselves, even as they learn. Not every activity can be a party, but neither should serious business drive parents away. Activities should be a mixture of business and fun. As for the center itself, it can be furnished comfortably with adult furniture, perhaps donated or solicited by parents. It can also be remodeled and decorated by parents. And, the center can offer refreshments, however small. When parents drink coffee with other parents and staff, and share information about how they can help their children, then the center is a success.

— Larry Yates

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